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# YOU CAN'T ROLLER SKATE IN A BUFFALO HERD

Daniel Stumeier

*Washington University in St Louis*, [dwstumeier@gmail.com](mailto:dwstumeier@gmail.com)

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# **YOU CAN'T ROLLER SKATE IN A BUFFALO HERD**

by  
Daniel Stumeier

A thesis presented to the  
Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts  
of Washington University in St. Louis  
in partial fulfillment of the  
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Thesis Advisor:

Jessica Baran, Adjunct Lecturer

Primary Advisors:

John Sarra, Senior Lecturer

Monika Weiss, Assistant Professor

Graduate Committee:

Jessica Baran, Adjunct Lecturer

John Early, Adjunct Lecturer

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## **Abstract**

Works and writings from various fields will be discussed throughout the following thesis, including those from contemporary art, anthropology, ethnology and literary theory. Particular attention will be paid to my studio practice as well as the work of artists: Amy Sillman, Eva Hesse, Richard Tuttle, Jackson Pollock, Donald Judd, Mary Heilmann, Haim Steinbach, Mike Kelley and Marcel Duchamp. Other important materials and texts that will be used to support my argument include: the 2007 group exhibition “Unmonumental: The Object in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, poet and art critic Raphael Rubenstein’s essay, “Provisional Painting,” anthropologist and ethnologist Claude Lévi-Strauss’s concept of “bricolage,” writer and critic Nicolas Bourriaud’s book, *The Radicant*, literary theorist Victor Shklovsky’s notion of “defamiliarization,” and the music of country singer/songwriter Roger Miller.

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## **Introduction: But you can be happy if you've a mind to**

Growing up in rural Illinois, country music was a constant soundtrack—permeating the air of my childhood and adolescence. As a result, I have developed a complicated relationship with this musical genre: songs I loved as a kid I now find insufferable, while other songs are more difficult for me to assess—these songs are both repulsive and perversely enjoyable, stirring up disconcerting feelings in my gut. I rarely agree with the agenda of these singers, but I appreciate the frankness and sincerity with which they deliver their message—often through the guise of humor or irony. These are characteristics I consider archetypal to country music, and strangely enough, they have become qualities I now strive to convey in my own artistic practice.

There is one singer/songwriter that is markedly significant to me—Roger Miller. I first became aware of Miller when I was a child—he is the voice of Alan-a-Dale, the rooster minstrel in the Disney animated film *Robin Hood*. Since then I have actively collected and listened to his music. One of Miller's most popular songs is "You Can't Roller Skate in a Buffalo Herd." In it he sings, "Ya can't roller skate in a buffalo herd/ Ya can't roller skate in a buffalo herd/ Ya can't roller skate in a buffalo herd/ But you can be happy if you've a mind to." He continues, "All ya gotta do is put your mind to it/ Knuckle down, buckle down, do it, do it, do it." He makes the pursuit of happiness seem so simple, and if I were to attempt to simplify my own working process, I might take a similar approach. While in my studio, I use Miller's philosophy—I work with a steady determination day after day, not always knowing what I hope to accomplish, but having faith that I can progress through sheer force of will. All I have to do is, "Knuckle down, buckle down, do it, do it, do it."

## Chapter 1: One thing after another

### I. Conditional Rationality

My practice is process driven—I think through creating, attempting to discover what makes a visual gesture resonate. Materials and motifs migrate from one piece to the next, each work influencing the other—when seen in concert, aesthetic incongruities add up to form a cohesive sense of conditional rationality, allowing for a fuller awareness of the irrationality present in my practice. While there is no preexisting logic, only my own logic in process, a sense of rigor makes itself apparent through the accumulation of my efforts. I present all of my objects together, forming an unexpected amalgamation. Ultimately, I leave this pursuit open-ended, allowing the viewer to make connections. In this way, my approach is similar to the painter Amy Sillman's, who said, "I like the idea of fragmentary thinking. I don't feel like I have a monumental, predetermined message, so rather than thinking monumentally, I took all my cultivated little friends and put them together. I can work in a casual way; then, when I put these little things together, they make sense in the end."<sup>i</sup>



Amy Sillman, "Thumb Cinema" (installation view), 2011. Capitain Petzel, Berlin.

In *low places*, my legal pad series, I work with an anti-formalist rigor. Using whatever materials I have at hand—acrylic paint, pencil, ballpoint pen, oil pastel, coffee, etcetera—I create visual contradictions that deploy modernist modes of abstraction while rejecting a sense of finish, resulting in a scrappy, incongruous aesthetic. Using ordinary, low-brow substrates such as 5 x 7 inch lined legal paper, my works appear humble and casual when seen discretely, but become something greater when seen collectively. With *low places*, as well as my furniture sculptures, I reveal intentionality through an unwavering format and a consistent practice of thinking through making.



Daniel Stumeier, *low places 14* and *low places 18*, ongoing series—2013-present.  
Mixed media on legal paper in handmade frames.

In his essay, *The Delicacy of Rock-and Roll*, art and cultural critic Dave Hickey observes how complexities emerge in popular music despite their simple formats; he writes:

Rock-and-roll, [...] presumes that the four of us—as damaged and anti-social as we are—might possibly get it *to-fucking-gether*, man, and play this simple song. And play it right, okay? Just this once, in tune and on the beat. But we can't. The song's too simple, and we're too complicated and too excited. We try like hell, but the guitars distort, the intonation bends, and the beat just moves, imperceptibly, against our formal expectations, whether we want it to or not. Just because we're *breathing*, man. Thus, in the process of

trying to play this very simple song together, we create this hurricane of noise, this infinitely complicated, fractal filigree of delicate distinctions.<sup>ii</sup>

My *low places* series functions in a similar way to the four musicians playing a “simple song” in Hickey’s essay: my process *seems* simple and my materials ordinary; I make abstract pictures on inexpensive, disposable paper, using whatever materials are available to me. As far as technical prowess, not very much seems evidenced; I produce these quickly and daily—stacks of scribbled, smudged and crumpled papers lie scattered on the floor of my work space. The decision between those that are kept as is and those that are reworked may appear arbitrary, but as the painter Jackson Pollock said, “I do have a general notion of what I am about and what the results will be.”<sup>iii</sup> What constitutes a finished drawing, painting or collage is not uninformed or indiscriminate; it is simply hard to put into words. Why one piece works and another falls flat is a persistent enigma and source of constant struggle. Sometimes a simple gesture is enough, but other times I overwork a piece to the point of excess, and it ends up in the trash. In either case, there is a hint of resignation on my part. Through endless experimentation with materials, mark-making and modes of abstraction, I try to tease out something ineffable, revealing complexities that emerge through my process and the sheer accretion of attempts.

In his essay, “Provisional Painting,” poet and art critic Raphael Rubinstein discusses a makeshift, rough-and-ready quality that he has observed in the work of many contemporary painters—he describes how many pieces come across as “casual, dashed-off, tentative, unfinished or self-cancelling,”<sup>iv</sup> and that many artists “deliberately turn away from ‘strong’ painting for something that seems to constantly risk in consequence or collapse.”<sup>v</sup> Rubinstein observes, “Something similar can be found in other art forms, in Paul Valéry’s insistence that a poem is ‘never finished, only abandoned,’ in Artaud’s call for ‘no more masterpieces,’ and in punk’s knowing embrace of the amateurish and fucked-up.”<sup>vi</sup> Likewise, all of my materials are



unremarkable, and I do not try or want to disguise this. Rather I embrace their ordinariness—my work is often hasty looking, modestly sized and made as cheaply as possible, but by not striving to make a perfect, polished piece, I am free to take risks and pursue any potentially interesting idea that crosses my mind.



Eva Hesse, “Eva Hesse Studiowork” (installation view), 2009-2010. Camden Arts Centre, London.

Like the artist Eva Hesse, I am in constant conversation with my materials as well as my working process. As Hesse said, “I [...] have a very strong feeling about honesty—and in the process, I like to be, it sounds corny, true to whatever I use, and use it in the least pretentious and most direct way.”<sup>vii</sup> Likewise, I do not embellish my materials; instead I try to use them in the “least pretentious and most direct way,”<sup>viii</sup> emphasizing specific qualities such as incidental stains left over from scrap lumber’s previous life, circular burn marks from a dull saw blade and wood glue oozing from splintered joints that are methodically fixed together.

## II. Obsessive Exactitude

For *low places*, I construct handmade frames. Applying a “bricoleur” approach, I unify my different series through this consistent mindset. Scraps lying around my studio become

continually recycled; a scrap of stained lumber with residual wood glue becomes an informal frame; two unsuccessful paintings are judiciously ripped and fastened together by a single small piece of masking tape; a faux holly leaf is added for extra effect, consciously disrupting an otherwise humdrum abstract picture. The collaged paper is then pressed firmly against the glass, accentuating its materiality—the crinkles and the tears and the impasto paint handling.



Daniel Stumeier, *low places 11*, ongoing series—2013-present.  
Mixed media on legal paper in handmade frame, 8 x 6 in.

Like the artist Richard Tuttle, I create intimate, playful pieces made from humble materials. In her essay, “Framed Drawings,” Tara McDowell writes about Tuttle’s notebook drawings of 1982, observing:

Though they are numbered, they do not progress toward a goal: each glyphlike watercolor, drawn on an everyday sheet of lined notebook paper, is like a Chinese character, but no sentence is formed, no logical sequence developed. Installed en masse, they simply overwhelm with their unyielding recurrence [...] and methodical seriality, throwing down the gauntlet to Donald Judd and his infamous mantra of ‘one thing after another.’<sup>ix</sup> [...] With deliberately imprecise joints and raw, splintery edges, they appear to

have been banged together in a careless way. But when installed, an obsessive exactitude emerges, a complete precision is revealed in the ‘true’ horizontal at their top edges and precise spacing between pieces.<sup>x</sup>



Richard Tuttle, *Great Men 2* and *Great Men 8*, 1982.  
Watercolor on paper in handmade frame, 9 ½ x 14 x 1 ¼ in.

Seen together, my work also reveals an “obsessive exactitude”<sup>xi</sup> that likely will not be appreciated when seen individually. Isolated from one another, these works almost beg to be dismissed due to their quiet poetic nature. Their scale and materials might make them seem inconsequential, and my process may seem messy as I fanatically scrawl, drip, smudge, smear and rip. As Pollock said, “I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etcetera, because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess.”<sup>xii</sup> While claiming that a “painting has a life of its own”<sup>xiii</sup> might be too sensational, I am aware that being *too* conscientious of my decisions while working can only inhibit me. Therefore, I strive to not have “fears about making changes”<sup>xiv</sup> or “destroying the image,”<sup>xv</sup> because I know that only through risk of failure do I

have the chance of success. If I care too much, my work will only suffer, becoming contrived and stilted. By presenting these works in handmade frames, I reiterate the significance of a finished piece and relate *low places* formally and conceptually to my other work, such as my furniture sculptures.

## Chapter 2: Where have all the average people gone?

### I. bits and pieces

When asked about his songwriting process, Roger Miller replied that he composed them from “bits and pieces” of ideas that he wrote on scraps of paper. Like Amy Sillman and myself, Miller did not have a “monumental, predetermined message,”<sup>xvi</sup> but rather, his approach was similar to “bricolage”—a term defined by the anthropologist and ethnologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss in his book *The Savage Mind* as the practice of creating something new by assembling “bits and pieces” from whatever is at hand. Lévi-Strauss writes:

[a ‘bricoleur’ is in] dialogue with [his] materials and means of execution,<sup>xvii</sup> [...] deriv[ing] his poetry from the fact that he does not confine himself to accomplishment and execution: he ‘speaks’ not only with things, [...] but also through things: giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities. The bricoleur may not ever complete his purpose but he always puts something of himself into it.<sup>xviii</sup> [...] The characteristic feature of [a ‘bricoleur’] is that [he] expresses [himself] by means of a heterogeneous repertoire which, even if extensive, is nevertheless limited. [He] has to use this repertoire, however, whatever the task at hand because [he] has nothing else at [his] disposal.<sup>xix</sup>

While the mentality of the “bricoleur” has informed many art traditions—including outsider art—my work does not fall easily into these categories. My use of readily available and found materials could also be aligned with Marcel Duchamp’s concept of the readymade, but again this is not an exact fit. Instead, I approach my work through the lens of a painterly tradition, which informs the formal and conceptual decisions that I make, extending into sculpture. For instance, I make modestly-sized tables created from a variety of materials. I recycle scraps of lumber that are at hand in my studio, but I also use materials that are easily obtainable at Home Depot, such as floor tile, trim, laminate shelving, plywood, OSB board, house paint and wood stain— as well as found objects such as cassette tapes bought from thrift

shops. By limiting my materials to those that are in-stock, salvaged or bought at thrift shops, I forfeit some amount of agency, forcing me to react to different stimuli and to improvise, compelling me to progress in unforeseen directions. As Eva Hesse said:

I am interested in finding out through working on the piece some of the potential and not the preconceived...As you work, the piece itself can define or redefine the next step, or the next step combined with some vague idea...I want to allow myself to get involved in what is happening and what can happen and be completely be free to let go and change.<sup>xx</sup>



Daniel Stumeier, *Sweet Sixteen*, 2014. Granite tile, laminated wood shelf, plywood, scrap lumber, wood stain, Reba McEntire cassette tapes, 24 ¼ x 13 x 13 in.

Often, I know the format of what I want to create, such as in my piece, *Sweet Sixteen*; the size of the table-top is determined by a 12 x 12 inch floor tile, and the height is roughly twice this. While certain elements were predetermined, other decisions were more impromptu. Working with materials that were readily available to me in my studio, each step influenced the

next. The collection of Reba McEntire cassette tapes bought at a thrift shop are placed simply, but purposefully, on the table-top. Completely unaltered except for how I have arranged and presented them, they appear as formal sculptural elements without denying their original identity. The title itself is also appropriated from one of McEntire's albums that is included as a cassette tape in the work. I apply this impromptu approach in many of my works, including the furniture sculpture, *Today I stayed inside and flew too close to the sun*. For the table-top of this piece, I used a white marble floor tile with a yellow discoloration in one corner; rather than ignoring this blemish I accentuated it by choosing a similar color for the trim.



Daniel Stumeier, *Today I flew too close to the sun*, 2014.  
Marble tile, trim, OSB board, scrap lumber, paint, 24 1/4 x 13 x 13 in.

While my choice of materials is only loosely defined by Lévi-Strauss's concept of "bricolage," the cultural implications of my work are absolutely informed by it. In the forward to



Lévi-Strauss's *Myth and Meaning: Cracking the Code of Culture*, Wendy Doniger writes, "[Lévi-Strauss] is the one who taught us that every myth is driven by the obsessive need to solve a paradox *that cannot be solved*. His critics see him as reducing myths to logical oppositions, but I see him as illuminating human ambivalences. Paradoxes are to Lévi-Strauss what whales were to Captain Ahab."<sup>xxi</sup>

In my studio practice, I strive to create works that are paradoxical; my tables evoke a range of associations—blurring distinctions between domestic furniture, modernist formalism and minimalist sculpture (with a touch of irony), while also laxly referencing plinths—resulting in objects whose function is enigmatic and ambiguous. These furniture sculptures can be thought of as art objects, but they also serve more practical functions—that of activating the space they are placed in and sometimes displaying found objects.



Donald Judd, *Chairs*, 1978. Common pine.

The materials and form of these furniture sculptures and how they are situated in space are influenced by the artist and writer Donald Judd's "specific objects" and more distinctly his furniture. In his essay, "It's Hard to Find a Good Lamp," Judd wrote:



The intent of art is different from that of [furniture], which must be functional. If a chair [...] is not functional, if it appears to be only art, it is ridiculous. The art of a chair is not its resemblance to art, but is partly its reasonableness, usefulness and scale as a chair. These are proportion, which is visible reasonableness. The art in art is partly the assertion of someone's interest regardless of other considerations. A work of art exists as itself; a chair exists as a chair itself. And the idea of a chair isn't a chair.<sup>xxii</sup>

Judd concluded his argument, writing, "The furniture is furniture and is only art in that architecture, ceramics, textiles and many things are art. We try to keep the furniture out of art galleries to avoid this confusion, which is far from my thinking."<sup>xxiii</sup> He argued that the distinction between art and furniture is fundamental, and while I agree to an extent, I am less concerned about defining these kinds of divisions in my own practice.



Mary Heilmann, "Mary Heilmann: To Be Someone" (installation view), 2008-2009.  
The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York City.

Thinking pluralistically, my approach is more comparable to the artist Mary Heilmann's, who sometimes installs her paintings alongside chairs that she constructs by hand. Working with a bright, acidic palette, Heilmann incorporates a wide variety of modernist structures borrowed from the history of abstract painting. Seemingly haphazard—Heilmann embraces visual contradictions, combining different motifs such as grids and blocks of color throughout her

painting practice. She extends this mentality into her brightly colored chairs made from plywood and nylon netting that are outfitted with casters—allowing the chairs to easily roll on the concrete floor of the gallery. Made in adult and children sizes, visitors are invited to sit in them, thus removing barriers between art and life. In *The New York Times* review of the exhibition “Mary Heilmann: To Be Someone,” Ken Johnson writes:

The furniture [...] reveal[s] an expansive impulse to produce a holistic world. She teeters on the edge of installation art. Yet, perhaps paradoxically, she continues to funnel her most ambitious energies into the concentrative art of painting, and in so doing she achieves states of grace that are harder won than they look.<sup>xxiv</sup>

By displaying paintings and chairs together, Heilmann interrupts the cultural expectations of painting and challenges the hierarchies between fine art and applied arts that Judd so vehemently defended. Like Heilmann, I aspire to ambiguity and prefer to make objects that have the potential to operate in a variety of modes—as formalist investigations, functional objects and conceptual signifiers—while also releasing them of the cultural weight the history of painting sometimes carries.

## **II. Funny I don’t fit**

In my studio practice, I think about my materials not only as substrates but also as conceptual signifiers. In this way my approach is similar to the artist Haim Steinbach’s, who selects and rearranges preexisting, found objects—re-contextualizing them through dissimilar juxtapositions and displaying them on formalist structures that emphasize their identities and significance. He redefines their status by shifting contexts, “[e]xploring the psychological, aesthetic, cultural and ritualistic aspects of objects.”<sup>xxv</sup> Steinbach’s piece, *froot loops 2*, consists of three components—a red and black plastic laminated wood shelf, three “Froot Loops” cereal boxes, and two rubber dog chews. By itself, the limited palette and simple form of the shelf

function similarly to minimalist sculpture, such as Judd's "specific-objects." However, the placement of the cereal boxes and rubber dog chews on top effectively debunks and complicates this role; similarly, by their re-presentation, these objects are "defamiliarized" and no longer simply consumer goods. The shelf and objects share similarities in color and form, and like the McEntire cassette tapes of my piece, *Sweet Sixteen*, Steinbach's objects "appear as formal sculptural elements while not denying their initial identity." Discussing the evolution of the thought process behind his practice, Steinbach says:

Beginning with some notion of pure painting, or art as art, I progressively worked toward the theory that you can't escape the cultural content of things, so why not deal with them? Why not start there? I began to see art as a cultural activity, something that comes out of a bigger framework and includes social and ethnological references.<sup>xxvi</sup>



Haim Steinbach, *froot loops 2*, 2008.  
Plastic laminated wood shelf, 2 rubber dog chews,  
3 "Froot Loops" cereal boxes, 28 ¼ x 62 x 13 ½ in.

I also realize that I "can't escape the cultural weight of things,"<sup>xxvii</sup> as a result, my choices are informed by my art educational background as well as my lower-middle-class upbringing in rural Illinois. I am influenced by provisional painting, minimalism and formalism, but I also deny them by including other, incongruent sources lifted from rural, Midwestern culture and

craft traditions. In the verses of his song, “Where Have All the Average People Gone,” Roger Miller sings about urban and rural culture, pacifism and standing up for one’s rights, religious conviction and secular moralism, and wealth and poverty. Like a “bricoleur,” Miller situates himself between each of these opposing principles and issues, emphasizing their complexity and how they cannot be thought about in terms of black and white, but only a murky gray. In the last verse Miller sings, “And the government has given me a number/ To simplify my birth and life and death/ And still my woman thinks I’m awful important/ Like the moon and the sun and the sea and the sky and breath.” He concludes his thoughts with the chorus, “Yes, it’s funny I don’t fit/ Where have all the average people gone?”

In my studio practice, I intentionally take influence from disparate sources, reclaiming what is significant to my own interests while not fully subscribing to any of them. I prefer not to fit in with any particular trajectory; instead I implement incompatible aspects from different cultures, forming a loose narrative and identity that is specific to me. Juxtaposing materials and modes of working, I present a pastiche of visual and cultural information that is disquieting yet oddly comforting—similar to the “repulsive and perversely enjoyable” effect that country music now often has on me. Curator, writer and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud discusses something similar in his book, *The Radicant*, defining his titular term:

To be radicant means setting one’s roots in motion, staging them in heterogeneous contexts and formats, denying them the power to completely define one’s identity, translating ideas, transcoding images, transplanting behaviors, exchanging rather than imposing.<sup>xxviii</sup> [...] Where modernism proceeded by subtraction in an effort to unearth the root, or principle, contemporary artists proceed by selection, additions, and then acts of multiplication. They do not seek an ideal state of the self or society. Instead, they organize signs in order to multiply one identity by another.<sup>xxix</sup>

My use of self-referential, ordinary materials coalescing with high art traditions could be aligned with artist and writer Mike Kelley's, who included items that are often invisible as aesthetic objects and also refer to his past. About his choice of materials, Kelley said:

In my work I play overtly with various aesthetic traditions. In art school I was trained in the modernist tradition, yet I felt compelled to return again and again to materials associated with my lower-middle-class upbringing, to reexamine those materials from a critical vantage point. [...] I was using these traditional materials in an intentionally perverse way—misusing them to reveal their conventionality.<sup>xxx</sup>



Mike Kelley, *More Love Hours Than Can Ever Be Repaid and The Wages of Sin*, 1987.  
Stuffed fabric toys and afghans on canvas with dried corn; wax candles on wood and metal base,  
90 x 119 ¼ x 5 in. overall plus candles and base.

Kelley diverged from modernism in that his work not so much reflected his own psychology but the psychology of our culture and how we interact and engage with these objects. Unlike Kelley, my training is not exactly in the modernist tradition. Instead, my work follows trajectories of artists who are responding to and counteracting modernism—artists like Kelley, Haim Steinbach, Mary Heilmann and Richard Tuttle—as well as artists who could be categorized as modernists, such as Eva Hesse and Donald Judd. Although my own experiences unavoidably inform my decisions, my personal history is not absolutely necessary for viewers to

appreciate my work. My materials and modes of working carry their own cultural significance, and I prefer to let viewers make their own connections.

### III. Pizza Time



Daniel Stumeier, *Pizza Time*, 2013-14. Towel, 8 x 16 ½ in.

My piece, *Pizza Time*, is created by the simple gesture of cutting a section of a natty kitchen dish towel and tacking it onto the wall, taking something commonplace and “defamiliarizing” it. Seen alongside *low places* and my furniture sculptures, *Pizza Time*, is at first a source of comfort—a scrap of domesticity placed in a self-constructed, self-contained environment filled with art objects. Over time, however, its displacement becomes one of the most disconcerting components. While it is usually obvious that *low places* are created using legal paper as a substrate, and the furniture sculptures carry overtones that clearly relate them to domestic furniture and environments, both series are still recognizable as art. *Pizza Time* originates from a similar place as my other work, but more saliently retains its previous common identity. It is unmistakably a scrap of a towel, but when tacked onto the wall of a studio, gallery or museum, its function and object-ness becomes unfixed. In this way, *Pizza Time* is informed by literary theorist Victor Shklovsky’s notion of “defamiliarization”—a term he devised in his

essay, “Art as Technique,” as a way for writers (and artists) to reexamine their interactions with objects or practices that have become automatic or habitual; he observed:

After we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us and we know about it, but we do not see it—hence we cannot say anything significant about it. Art removes objects from the automatism of perception in several ways.<sup>xxxix</sup> [...] The technique of art is to make objects, ‘unfamiliar,’ to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. *Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important.*<sup>xxxii</sup>

In 1917, Duchamp created *Fountain* through a similar gesture as my own—presenting a porcelain urinal that he dated and signed with the moniker, R. Mutt. Thus, he effectively disconnected the relationship of skilled labor and artistic merit, focusing instead on intellectual interpretation and consequently shaping artistic practices of the past century. In a television interview Duchamp said, “My idea was to choose an object that wouldn't attract me, either by its beauty or by its ugliness. To find a point of indifference in my looking at it, you see.”<sup>xxxiii</sup> While my tongue-in-cheek repurposing of a found towel could be compared to Duchamp’s concept of the readymade, my motives behind *Pizza Time* are decidedly different. Duchamp’s attitude toward his found objects was one of detached indifference; instead, I re-present common, unremarkable objects and materials through a painterly lens, reconsidering and possibly transcending their point of origin.

## Conclusion: My Midwestern Mythos

In 2007 the New Museum of Contemporary Art celebrated the opening of its new location and building with “Unmonumental: The Object in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” a group show comprised entirely of assemblage-type sculpture that, as art critic Roberta Smith writes:

tends to be low-tech, modest in scale, made with found objects and materials and structured in ways that are fragmented if not actually disintegrating. Its ugly-duckling looks, rough edges, disparate parts and weird juxtapositions help stave off easy art-market absorption while also reflecting our fearful, fractured, materially excessive times back at us.<sup>xxxiv</sup>

Most of the artists in that exhibition were responding to a post 9/11 culture, the surplus of material waste that crowds urban environments, and increasingly cramped studio and living conditions in urban centers as a result of soaring urban housing rates. Richard Flood, the exhibition’s curator, alludes to these abject conditions in the essay he provided for the show’s catalogue, “Not About Mel Gibson;” in it, Flood writes:

Our time demands the anti-masterpiece. Things that are cobbled together, pushed and prodded into a state of suspended animation feel right. Stubby, brutish forms that know something of the world in which they are made tell the contemporary story. Works that appear hurled into uncomfortable, anxious relationships run parallel to life.<sup>xxxv</sup> [...] Extravagant gestures have given way to a handshake or a hug (maybe even a shrug).<sup>xxxvi</sup>

Flood continues, “We live in a world of half-gestures where there is no definitive stance and the sands shift incessantly over a desert of evidential truth.”<sup>xxxvii</sup> Some of this is true of my studio practice—I paint at home in a designated corner of my living room; this partially determines the size of my work and the materials I use, resulting in pieces that are modestly scaled and materials that are non-hazardous, such as acrylic paint. As an emerging artist, my storage is minimal and my income limited, and these are also issues I consider. While many of the pieces in “Unmonumental: The Object in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century” share a similar aesthetic with my work, my studio practice is informed by very different impetuses. Like the artists in this show, I



am also responding to a limited workspace and income, but the materials and modes of working I use are largely influenced by a drastically different place than that of the urban environment. My lower-middle-class rural upbringing continues to influence the decisions I make, even when I am now dislocated from it. Like Bourriaud's concept of the *radicant*, I "organize signs in order to multiply one identity by another,"<sup>xxxviii</sup> and while I am deeply influenced by contemporary art, artists and visual culture, I am influenced by my past as well. Although not necessarily my "content," my personal history often, inevitably, drives my work. I have mentioned country music, and while this musical genre is significant to me, it is only one "root" of many that has informed my practice. I could also write about crafting 4-H projects for the county fair, watching my mom cross-stitch and crochet, working with my dad painting houses, or laying tile and wood flooring with my brother-in-law. The point being that my earliest exposure to creating and working was not in a high art context, but was either craft-oriented or blue-collar manual labor, and I still carry these experiences with me. Growing up in a rural environment, art simply was not around; it was something I had to make a conscious effort to research on my own, and to pursue a career in art required removing myself from this location and moving elsewhere.

My practice functions similar to a dream in which people and places from past and present coexist, and in this state of mind, these juxtapositions seem lucid. As Bourriaud writes, "Where modernism proceeded by subtraction in an effort to unearth the root, or principle, contemporary artists proceed by selection, additions, and then acts of multiplication."<sup>xxxix</sup> I think of modernism as a radical distillation that focuses on characteristics specific to a chosen medium. And while I find this an interesting and valid mode, I want my materials to do more. For me, modernism is a "root"—like country music, painting, bricolage, minimalism, and then some. I cannot help but be influenced by my upbringing, and I often use materials and modes of working

that signify that time and place—“misusing them to reveal their conventionality.”<sup>x1</sup> Through a subtle subversion of materials, my work becomes vaguely autobiographical in its sense of a place and time. Creating visual contradictions that form a loose narrative, I look for the potential of success beyond the limited perception of my materials’ nature, wanting them to do more—attempting to decode and disentangle *my* Midwestern mythos.

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## Endnotes

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